

# Political Regionalism and Administrative Regionalism

By DONALD DAVIDSON

TO THE general reader anxious to gather comfort from the studies of experts, nothing is more encouraging than the present disposition of political science to lift the anathema from discussions of regionalism, for the social scientist who is willing to talk about regionalism is, by that act, willing to speak American, as the followers of Marx and other European guides seemingly are not; and by implication, he is also willing to admit that more than one kind of American can be spoken. Such a comfort is worth having in a time when the general reader has been all but overwhelmed by popular advocates who think and write in a different context and can see but one design wherever they look. It is a little discouraging, perhaps, to find that "regionalism" is excluded from the compendious index of the Beards' *America in Midpassage*, which includes everything else under the sun. But the great studies of the National Resources Committee, which emphatically do make a place for regionalism, and the special or general studies of other agencies and individuals more than balance the account.

Among social scientists, certainly, the discussion of regionalism has proceeded far enough to distinguish some general agreement on the following fundamentals: (1) the existence in the United States of marked regional differentiations which arise from various causes, some old, some new; (2) the existence of large-scale social and economic problems, differing in kind and degree, which have a regional outline; (3) the inability of separate states to deal adequately with such problems; (4) the demonstrable inequalities caused by attempts to meet these problems by Federal legislation; and (5) the historic fact that

nonsolution or inadequate solution of such problems leads to sectionalism, which is political regionalism in its gross and active form.

## POLITICAL REGIONALISM

The gross form of political regionalism appears when a major regional grievance remains unsatisfied over a considerable time and the region concerned is left "without recourse." If the issue is brought into the arena of national policy and if the region is left in a solid minority, with a majority vote concentrated in other regions, then we have the extreme result: secession, as in the sixties; or threatened secession, as upon many occasions; or at least long continuing disturbance and bad feeling.

But political regionalism, if it is a sin, is not to be imputed to the minority region alone. The majority regions, for all their insistence on the merits of their "national" view, derive a profit which is denied to the minority region. The national view, so-called, may bring advantage to one part of the Nation and disadvantage to another part. Hence, as Turner has pointed out, regional leaders invariably disguise specifically regional aims and attempt to give regional policies the coloring of national policies. Political regionalism, though locally motivated, aims at Federal policy. Federal policy is always being influenced by the interplay of regional aims, and often turns out to be political regionalism falsely generalized.

There is no real disagreement as to the ends to be obtained by a national policy which would take this situation into account. Economic inequalities between regions hurt just as much as the economic inequalities between "classes" about which we now hear so much. The

only disagreement among serious-minded people will be as to the method of righting such disparities or forestalling their appearance. Since the search for a method has just begun, it is highly important that all reasonable suggestions be received hospitably. At the same time, they should be discussed critically. We cannot afford to reject out-of-hand anything that looks practicable, or to commit ourselves too deeply to any device that may prove deceptive.

The present concern of social science with administrative regionalism evidently arises out of a desire to avoid the harsh results of political regionalism. With our economy already in a delicate condition from many complex causes, we cannot risk even a mild attack of political regionalism. And since the Federal Government, now more than ever, has enlarged its scope and become an economic rather than a political government, political scientists naturally turn to the Federal Government itself and ask whether its functions cannot be adapted to regional needs. The idea of administrative regionalism harmonizes on one side with the growing feeling that the industrial economy is too rigidly, too awkwardly, centralized, and ought for its own health to be decentralized; and on the other side with a notion, still not clearly outlined, that autonomous desires of regions may be defined through regional planning boards and other legal or extralegal agencies which will act in an advisory and informative capacity.

Administrative regionalism, then, is an effort to achieve better organic relationship between the Federal Government and the states (or groups of states) by regionalizing some of the functions of the Federal Government and by encouraging the growth of nonadministrative agencies which transmit, so to speak, the collective will of regions.

### OLD AND NEW ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONALISM

Here it seems wise to make a distinction between the old and the new form of administrative regionalism. The old administrative regionalism is represented in those divisions (now large in number) which the Federal Government has set up to carry out explicitly Federal functions, as, for example: to take the census, to collect revenue, to administer the Federal Reserve System, or to administer the various "alphabet agencies" of the New Deal. Various students have pointed out that the establishment of such territorial jurisdictions is in itself evidence of the regional character of the Nation, and that improvement in Federal administration would occur if some consolidations of jurisdiction could be made. Such observations have weight and merit, but they do not bring us any nearer to a solution of the problems of political regionalism. The Federal agencies of the kind referred to were not set up with any idea of relieving the specific pressures that cause political regionalism. Though they may touch regional problems, they do so from the strictly Federal point of view, under the assumption that a given Federal operation has exactly the same result in one region as in another. They do not assume the validity of the regional approach as such, but leave us in the realm of an enlarging Federal power and a diminishing state power.

The new administrative regionalism differs from the old in its assumption that Federal authority may be applied constructively in one region without at the same time applying it in all regions. It acknowledges inequality of operation and attempts to turn inequality into a benefit. It also differs from the old administrative regionalism in its ingenious method of applying Federal authority, so as to have the advantage, at a stra-

tegic point, of national rather than merely regional resources. Thus an old difficulty is apparently surmounted. The trouble with Federal legislation has always been like this: that the protective tariff protected the North but not the South; that the gold standard was good for the East but bad for the West; that the Negro slave was recognized as property not only in the Southern states but in all other states. The new administrative regionalism seems to afford a way of legislating for one region alone. The way to do it is to apply locally (and subtly extend) powers already clearly within the Federal province.

#### TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY

Among possible examples of the new administrative regionalism, the Tennessee Valley project offers the richest field of study, for its implications are now fully developed, and it seems to be a model of what the new device is expected to accomplish. It stays within the technical limits of constitutional prescription, and yet it has far-reaching aims which transcend a conventional interpretation of the bounds of Federal authority. Ostensibly the Tennessee Valley Authority works within the unimpeachably Federal sphere of navigation and flood control. It is charged with the maintenance of a nine-foot navigable channel on a river where steamboats are about as numerous as mule-wagons on city streets. "The Board is hereby directed (the act solemnly says) in the operation of any dam or reservoir . . . to regulate the stream flow primarily for the purposes of promoting navigation and controlling floods." As a secondary function the Board is empowered to construct dams and transmission lines for the disposal of electric energy "in order to avoid the waste of water power, to transmit and market such power as in this act is provided, and thereby . . . to assist in liq-

uidating the cost or aid in the maintenance of the projects of the Authority."

The steps by which the by-product, electric power, has become the major product are well known. At this writing, the Tennessee Valley Authority by the use of apparently quite constitutional methods has eliminated a private power monopoly from competition in its regional area. A fundamental economic resource in a well-defined region is in the hands of a regional unit of the Federal Government. The "yardstick" furnished by the T.V.A. may be useful in national policy, but the real meaning of the T.V.A. as a Federal-regional device is in its action upon the depleted or "backward" economy of the Tennessee Valley and perhaps even of the upper South in general, which it is expected to "develop" or at least improve.

The development is to come in part, but only in part, from flood control, soil conservation, and reforestation. These are "good" reasons, legitimate Federal reasons, for the establishment of the T.V.A. Beyond these good reasons are the real reasons, foreshadowed in certain vague phrases in the act and frequently cited by social scientists who expect the T.V.A. not only to justify itself in the Federal sphere but also to help in removing some of the old and pressing causes of sectional irritation. The real reasons are that the T.V.A. will rectify the economic disadvantage into which the region has fallen and that it will prove to be a model for similar intervening Federal-regional agencies, which will cope not with identical difficulties elsewhere but with regional difficulties peculiar and pressing enough to deserve this "unequal" benefit of Federal law. The device, if it works, is expected to transform "sectionalism" into "regionalism" (in the beneficent sense described by Howard Odum), and to do so without endangering national

unity on the one hand or imposing rigid unification on the other.

Undoubtedly the T.V.A. can accomplish—has already in part accomplished—the instrumental tasks for which it was created: it can improve land use, control floods and soil erosion, and manufacture and distribute power. But can it also relieve the economic disadvantage of the Tennessee Valley region (and in some measure of the upper South) without either doing harm to some distant region or changing to a marked degree the regional “culture” which it is supposed to conserve?

#### SHORTCOMINGS OF T.V.A.

In answering this question we should not fail to note that the regional experiment has become a national issue, not in terms of the beneficial functions that it exercises within its region, but in terms of what it means for national power policies. Members of Congress who debate over the T.V.A. do not seem to know about “administrative regionalism”; they do not vote T.V.A. appropriations with much sense of the value of the T.V.A. as a *regional* experiment. This warping of emphasis is due in part to the fact that the “power issue” is in national politics anyhow; but it is also due in part to the fact that the T.V.A. cannot *legally* be represented as having a specifically regional purpose.

Next, the conception of the T.V.A. embodies an analogy which may or may not apply in the Southeast. It is conceived and framed in terms of the industrial economy of the Northeast and the Middle states, and not of the largely agrarian economy in which it is set up. The inference is that the T.V.A. will confer upon the Tennessee Valley area the same benefits that would accrue to the upper Hudson Valley if a similar agency were established there. The T.V.A. proposes to transform a low-income, agricultural area into an area

with a higher cash income or at least a larger real income. The economic imbalance is to be righted in terms of new industries, pay rolls, dividends, improved farming methods (including labor-saving machinery in house and field as well as diversification of crops), and in general a typically modern use of natural and human resources.

As one examines this broad inference he begins to suspect that the new administrative regionalism, no less than Federal legislation of the past, will reflect the psychology, economics, and generalized wishes of whatever regional group happens at the moment to possess Federal power; or, to put it differently, that the new administrative regionalism may be simply another expression of political regionalism.

The regional psychology of the T.V.A. conception is not native to the South. The T.V.A. was not created in response to a Southern crusade—although some Southern Congressmen had long agitated for a final disposition of Muscle Shoals. There was no popular outcry in the South for a T.V.A. The sponsor of the T.V.A. Act was a Middle Westerner, Senator Norris, who was crusading against electric utilities. What President Roosevelt contributed to the conception, we do not surely know; but the idea of a planned economy, popular among New Deal liberals of the Northeast, had something to do with the sudden launching of the great enterprise, which was created by Congress within two months after the first inauguration of President Roosevelt. The five states concerned had no opportunity to debate the project or to contribute ideas and leading personnel, or by any direct means to make known their opinion, if they had any; the project was superimposed (however benevolently) upon them.

Furthermore, the conception of the T.V.A., while proposing to remedy re-

gional disadvantages, ignores the great underlying causes of those regional disadvantages. There is nothing in the T.V.A. program, immediate or ultimate, which promises to alter the relative economic positions of the dominant industrial Northeast and the all but completely "colonialized" and "agrarian" Southeast. Soil control and erosion programs are a concrete good in themselves, of course. But the market price of Southern farm products does not increase merely because they are grown on non-eroded land. The price of Northern manufactures (even of labor-saving machinery) does not decrease when they are bought by farmers on non-eroded lands where houses and barns are being supplied with electricity from government-owned plants. The promise of cheap fertilizer is interesting—and would be more interesting if we had not been assured that Tennessee phosphate lands are to be considered a "national" (perhaps even a military) reserve. But what is there in the T.V.A. program to change the relative position of a region where from 60 to 80 per cent of the farms reported their products in 1929 in the lowest cash-value column?

Industry is expected to "balance" agriculture by adding cash and thus relieving the strain. Against this promise we must set the established fact of extraregional ownership and control of industry, business, and even much farm land. There is little to indicate that administrative regionalism, in the form of the T.V.A. or any other body yet suggested, will reduce the already heavy percentage of absentee-landlordism in Southern industry; or encourage the rise of new industries, Southern-owned, which will sell goods at prices commensurate with Southern ability to buy; or protect such industries, if they should arise, against being eaten up by national (that is, Northeastern-controlled) monopolies. Yet economic im-

balance in the region probably cannot be righted unless such things are attended to. Slight gains derived from cheaper power rates and larger pay rolls will probably help a little, but may be more than offset by the fact that the population will be drawn farther away from the agrarian economy and involved more deeply than ever in the chain of increasing purchases and increasing debts.

The program, in short, may benefit urban entrepreneurs and selected industrial groups, while the region as a whole feels, at closer range than before, the impact of an exploitative system. It is possible to argue that the T.V.A. is not a subsidy of the region, but actually another subsidy of the exploitative forces which have already set the region at a disadvantage.

Meanwhile, the play of other forces that tend to cause political regionalism goes on unchecked. The surplus population of the biologically lusty Southeast gets driven from rich land to poor land by the advance of labor-saving machinery, corporate farming, and absentee ownership; and its natural tendency to migrate to other regions is no longer facilitated—is indeed positively checked—by those regions, which are less receptive than of old. The industrialists of the Southeast begin their fight against differential freight rates and complain against the Federal wages-and-hours law, which, in their eyes at least, is rank sectionalism in a Federal disguise. And other specifically Southern problems of race, public education, suffrage qualifications, and the like remain confused and unsolved.

#### ANALYSIS OF NEW ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONALISM

The nature of the new administrative regionalism becomes fairly plain if it is viewed in such a context. A device like the Tennessee Valley Authority is

not an agent of a region which of its own will and out of its own resources has won a degree of autonomy or semi-autonomy. It is not a new unit of government, standing in a clearly defined middle ground between the states and the Federal Government. It is an agent of the Federal Government, or, more concretely, of the Federal Government of 1929-39—a “crisis government” desperately concerned with making an economic system work. That government apparently conceives the economic system to be irredeemably of a large-scale industrial type and has entered upon its reforms as if only that one type were possible in the United States. Conceding that the system causes inequalities to appear along “class lines,” it has undertaken to repair the inequalities. But the same economic system is largely to blame for gross regional inequalities, which cut across class lines.

The new administrative regionalism cannot repair regional inequalities if it looks principally at class inequalities, and simultaneously retains, and even bolsters up, the identical economic system which causes stress lines to take a regional outline. Such a policy will probably have one or the other of two results: Either the regional economy of the Southeast (as our present example) will be completely changed and made an indistinguishable part of the one big national economy—in which case regionalism in very truth will become merely administrative, for the “conquest” of the Southeast begun in the eighteen-sixties will then have reached completion; or the effort to achieve such fusion will not succeed but will instead stimulate the rise of a competing regional economy, intent upon self-sufficiency and separatism—or political regionalism in its most active form. The rise of re-

gional “industrial councils” and other concerted regional movements, as well as the growth of interstate “tariffs,” seems to indicate that the second rather than the first result is now being produced.

#### OLD ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONALISM PREFERABLE

Such an analysis leads to the conclusion—undoubtedly speculative—that administrative regionalism most clearly demonstrates its value as it remains in the older sphere of action and does not too boldly enter the new one. As a unit of a Federal system of flood control and river management, with incidental benefits in conservation of land and forests, the T.V.A. is solid and reasonable—exactly what it appears to be in the descriptions set forth by the National Resources Committee in its publication entitled *Drainage Basin Problems and Plans*. But for checking or transforming political regionalism, such a device is far short of what we need. As long as the supposedly “national” economy is a sectional economy in disguise and remains exploitative in its action, the forces of political regionalism will jockey for power in the Federal Government, or, failing there, will endeavor to set up protective boundaries or their equivalent.

If this be true, it follows that some consideration of the economy itself must come into the argument. That question cannot be argued here. Suffice it to say that rebellious regions like the South and the West would be less rebellious if they could not accuse the Federal Government of subsidizing and protecting the economy which despoils them, while at the same time it frustrates their own efforts at self-protection and thus deprives them of all recourse.

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